COMMUNICATION BETWEEN RUSSIAN TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

By

Aleksey Sergeyevich Popov

RECOMMENDED:

Pamela J. McAllister

Christine E. Cooper

Jim Brown

Advisory Committee Chair

Jim Brown

Chair, Department of Communication

APPROVED:

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Susan M. Kennedy

Dean of the Graduate School

April 30, 2004

Date

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A

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Aleksey Sergeyevich Popov, B.Ed.

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ABSTRACT

This research employs qualitative narrative analysis in order to better understand the lived experience of American undergraduate students' interactive relationships with Russian Teaching Assistants particularly in Communication courses 131x "Fundamentals of Oral Communication – Group Context" and 141x "Fundamentals of Oral Communication – Public Speaking" at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Narrative interviews revealed several emergent themes. They are: assertiveness in the classroom, language barrier, grading difficulties, Russian TAs' enthusiasm, and getting used to the classroom environment.

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O voyagers, O seamen, You who come to port, and you whose bodies will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea, Or whatever event, this is your real destination.

T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets

INTRODUCTION

The main task of any teacher is to communicate with students as a means of sharing the information of their discipline. Therefore, both language and teaching skills become essential for quality teaching. A third set of skills that becomes necessary for international Teaching Assistants, and one that is not demanded to the same degree of native-speaking TAs, is the development of cross-cultural communication skills based on an awareness of the differences between the culture of their home countries and that of the United States, and more specifically, in this study, Alaska.

I remember having the assumption that students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks would be rude and disrespectful in class, as I sometimes saw those behaviors in U.S. American movies. I am in my fourth semester of teaching at UAF and I've never come across any such student. Instead most of the students are kind and respectful to their instructors and, moreover, they are also more than willing to accept a foreign TA as their teacher. From my experience, students like an instructor who comes to class prepared, delivers useful information, and respects them as individuals.

Most conspicuous is the difference in the way learning is organized. In U.S. universities, students take relatively short courses from which they learn the basic concepts, methodology, and principles of the subject and the emphasis is put on active, independent work. Russian students take year-long courses in which each subject is studied in depth with a mass of detail, often with equal attention both to less and more essential issues.

Another important consideration is student attitudes. Understanding student attitudes can be difficult at times, as the degree of student informality varies from university to university and from one part of the country to another. On the whole, American students dress and act more casually than students in most other countries. Such informality may appear disrespectful to many international TAs, and it may take time for the TA to understand and tolerate some of the more casual behavior of Americans.

In particular, one may find:

Casual dress. In the U.S., students come to class in jeans, shorts, t-shirts, sneakers, and baseball caps. Students rarely come to class in a suit, for instance.

Late arrival/Early departure. Some students arrive late or leave class early. If this is generally unacceptable, the instructor may wish to make this clear to students at the start of the term.

I, myself, was taken aback during my first semester when some students came to my class late and left early. I thought I had done something wrong, but later I learned

that, unlike in my country (Russia), many students have full- or part-time jobs, have family responsibilities, or have other pressing life commitments.

Eating and drinking during class. Americans often eat "on the run." They may bring a drink, snack, or even their lunch to class. While eating in class is generally acceptable to some in the U.S., it is not acceptable to distract others. Eating and drinking are usually done quietly and discreetly.

The problem of first names and titles. Some undergraduate students use the formal title "professor" when addressing their instructors, regardless of the instructor's actual standing in the university. It is also common to use other titles, such as "Dr.", "Ms.", or "Mr." or even the instructor's first name. Yet sometimes American students will not even address their teachers by name–they may simply seek their attention, such as by saying "excuse me." This informality does not suggest disrespect. To put everyone at ease, instructors often tell students at the start of term how they would like to be addressed, especially if they prefer a "first name" basis (at University of Alaska Fairbanks, this is very common).

Students seem to expect high grades, even when their performance is not that impressive. When I began teaching in the U.S. I did not know how important it is to set expectations from the very beginning as to the difficulty and requirements of the course. Later I learned to set them clearly at the very beginning, including performance and grades. Even if setting expectations at the onset results in some students dropping the course it is still better being left with a small class who want to stay and know what they are getting into.

This research was undertaken in response to my own experience of being a Teaching Assistant of Communication 131x "Fundamentals of Oral Communication – Group Context" and Communication 141 "Fundamentals of Oral Communication – Public Context" courses. Having taught these courses for two years, I now understand that teaching American students is challenging.

The purpose of this research is to explore American undergraduate students' experiences with Russian TAs and Russian TAs' experiences of teaching in American classrooms.

CHAPTER ONE:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Statement of the Problem

Through the years, the title "Graduate Teaching Assistant" has been possibly one of the most ambiguous in higher education. The assistantship is most often a form of financial aid for the graduate student. Also for many graduate students, the role of a graduate TA is an apprenticeship and preparation for a career as a faculty member.

However, there have been growing concerns about the quality of graduate student teaching as Instructors and Teaching Assistants, and concerns also about how various trends in higher education have led to an increase in such instruction. Once such trend is the expansion of undergraduate enrollments; another is the more rapid growth in the number of students admitted to graduate study.

For the past fifteen years (Plakans, 1997), major U.S. research universities, especially science, mathematics, and engineering departments, have offered an increasing number of teaching assistantships to new graduate students from foreign countries who are not native speakers of American English. Both because fewer U.S. students are undertaking graduate work in science and engineering fields and because many of the foreign applicants are highly qualified in their prospective fields of study, departments sometimes offer assistantships as an inducement to foreign students during the recruiting process. Holding student visas makes international students ineligible for most off-campus employment and grateful for whatever positions a university offers. Because TAs are a North American invention, rarely found in higher education systems in other parts

of the world (Bailey, 1984), international graduate students are frequently unaware of what to expect.

The five top countries of origin from which these graduate students come are Japan, China, India, Korea, and Taiwan. The exact number of international graduate assistants (ITAs) at U.S. colleges is not available, but numerous studies focusing on international graduate assistants call people's attention to this unique cultural phenomenon on the U.S. college campuses (Ard, 1989; Mestenhauser, Perry, Paige, M., Landa, Brutsch, Dege, Doyle, Gillette, Hughes, Judy, Keye, Murphy, Smith, Vanderluis, & Wendt, 1980, Plakans, 1997; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1991; Tyler, 1992; Yook & Albert, 1999; Yule & Hoffman, 1993; Williams, 1992).

These studies have largely focused on the question of effective education. Much of the literature focuses on evaluation and training programs for international graduate assistants and international graduate assistants' performance in the U.S. classrooms (Louis, 1998). Some studies offer ways to analyze and evaluate the training programs (e.g., Tyler, 1992). Some suggest new methods of training international graduate assistants (Ard, 1989; Yule & Hoffman, 1990). Other studies focus on the improvement of international graduate assistants' English pronunciation and their pedagogy skill in U.S. classrooms (e.g., Yule & Hoffman, 1993). Initially responding to student complaints about language, trainers of ITAs rapidly discovered the impossibility of anticipating quick results from a crash course in English as a second language (ESL). They further discovered ITAs' difficulty in expressing themselves appropriately in different contexts (Hoekje & Williams, 1992) and in applying to their teaching the information and skills

learned in training programs. Programs have become increasingly sophisticated and practice-oriented in their approach to language, pedagogy, and culture.

There are also changing patterns in the professional work of the professor and in financial support of the graduate student. Students themselves, both undergraduate and graduate, have changed in backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and interests. Critics contend that whatever role GTAs do serve, they are too often unsupervised (Rodriguez, 2000).

The University of Minnesota was among the first U.S. institutions to survey undergraduate concerns with ITAs (Berdie, Anderson, Wenberg, & Price, 1976; Matross, Paige, & Hendricks, 1982; Mestenhauser et al., 1980). One such study suggests:

> Over 43% of the undergraduate respondents to the Mestenhauser survey said that an ITA had hurt course quality, whereas 9% indicated that an ITA had helped. Six months later, Matross et al. surveyed the same 404 students who had participated in the Mestenhauser study, partly to assess changes in attitudes toward foreign students before and after the Iran hostage crisis. They discovered that less than one-third of the respondents agreed that there was meaningful contact between U.S. and foreign students at the university and that less than one-sixth agreed that foreign students had contributed to their education. Although 64% reported having a foreign student as a casual friend, only 16% said they had a foreign student as a close friend. (Plakans, 1997, p. 98)

Several doctoral dissertations were written in the early 1980s concerning undergraduates and their relations with ITAs. Orth (1983) compared undergraduates'

evaluations of the speaking proficiency of ITAs with ESL teachers' evaluations of the same ITAs and found drastic differences. The undergraduates rated the ITAs less on linguistic than on extralinguistic features of delivery and other nonverbal aspects of communication. In her study of classroom behavior of TAs (half non-native and half native English speakers), Bailey (1983) discovered that students who were not majoring in the same disciplines as their ITAs were significantly more critical of the nonnative speakers' public performance in English than were the students sharing a common academic major with their TAs. However, she found that the ITAs' individual personalities and styles of teaching contributed greatly to how they were evaluated.

In the introduction to a National Association for Foreign Student Affairs publication on ITA issues, Bailey (1984) was one of the first to make the following point about discontent: "Undergraduate students, while often having valid reasons to complain, sometimes respond to their non-native speaking TAs' foreignness with an attitude of annoyed ethnocentrism" (p. 15).

Graduate students teach undergraduate students in every major U.S. university. Properly utilized GTAs can be effective, but this requires an organized program of training and supervision and recognition of the emerging professional status of the graduate student. The entire process requires continual assessment by departments and universities. Well-designed programs that are clearly targeted and attractively presented to graduate students may benefit these students — as well as undergraduate students and universities as a whole — in several ways. Programs can provide training necessary for effective instruction of undergraduate students. GTAs who are interested in careers in

higher education can develop skills and acquire knowledge in both the theory and pedagogy of teaching at this level, thus reducing the need for remedial programs for beginning professors. In addition, because of their successful classroom experiences, top graduate students may consider careers in higher education (Rodriguez, 2000).

Although not all GTAs become professors, virtually all professors have been GTAs and report that, however limited it may have been, this experience remains the major preparation for their teaching responsibilities (Nyquist & Sprague, 1991). There seems to be greater recognition that learning to teach should be an integral component of the graduate education of all who anticipate a career in higher education.

Culture

There is no doubt that people everywhere share common problems. The distinctive ways that groups think and act to deal with the problems of everyday existence are shaped by what social scientists call culture. Culture focuses on customs, traditions, and behaviors. A distinctive language, a religious system, laws, and customs form the most readily accessible and identifiable parts of culture. As people move from one culture to another, differences become apparent to them. Moreover, they frequently experience a state known as "culture shock," the psychic stress brought on by the strain of adjusting to a different culture (Beamer & Varner, 2001).

There are many definitions of culture. As people mature, they learn certain values and assumptions from parents, teachers, books, newspapers, and television programs. Values are ideas about what is right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, normal and abnormal, proper and improper. Any list of values is arbitrary, because these values

overlap with and support each other. Beamer & Varner (2001) define culture as "the coherent, learned, shared view of people about life's concerns that ranks what is important, furnishes attitudes about what things are appropriate, and dictates behavior" (p. 3).

An understanding of culture can help one develop important skills to enhance one's ability to teach in U.S. classrooms. As one fulfills the responsibilities as an international faculty member or teaching associate, s/he will learn to adopt some of the culture of this country both in and out of the classroom. One may find that, in some ways, U.S. culture is very similar to one's own. In other ways, one may find that there are fundamental differences between this country and one's home.

Culture changes and people must continuously adapt to new cultural knowledge. Because people must learn new systems of knowledge when they enter new situations, most people are potentially multicultural (Cushner & Brislin, 1996).

Culture Shock and Cultural Adjustment

During one's stay in another culture, one may experience a state called "culture shock" which can include the following reactions: frustration, anxiety, anger, minor health problems, disruptions in one's eating and sleeping habits, lack of motivation, difficulty in forming new friendships, and periods of feeling both good and bad about one's new life (Beamer & Varner, 2001). These can be natural reactions to the stress of living in a new culture. Also, one can expect to experience cycles of cultural stress and emotional reactions to that stress. Such cycles can be viewed as stages. Care should be taken that many aspects of individual personality and experience profoundly affect this

basic formula. That is why one's "cycles of cultural adjustment" may differ a bit from those presented below; nevertheless, few people are able to live in, work in, and learn about a new culture without experiencing all these stages to some degree. Neither will everyone experience a severe case of culture shock, nor will all the symptoms be observed. Many people go through culture shock with relative ease, only at times experiencing the more serious reactions.

These "steps" that every newcomer takes down the path towards cultural adjustment will be briefly described below (Lennox, as cited in Clement, Willingham-McLain, & Wells, 2003).

Stage One: *Excitement or euphoria.*

In this stage, everything about the exciting adventure is wonderful. Newcomers experience new sights, sounds, foods, and people. The newcomer discovers that individuals from the host culture are very helpful and take care of the newcomer. Indeed, often the newcomer feels pampered, and may also feel euphoric about his/her arrival in the new culture following hectic weeks or months of preparation. A student in this stage demonstrates an active interest in listening to people speak. People are delightful to work with and they frequently nod or smile to indicate understanding when in fact they may not understand at all. This state usually lasts from a few days up to six months (Lenox, 2003).

Stage Two: *Rejection or frustration*

During this period the newcomer has to cope with the tasks and responsibilities associated with daily life. One may say it is the crisis period in cultural adjustment.

Students, for instance, are upset because although they have studied the language of the host country, they do not seem to understand it as well as they thought they could

If the newcomer successfully completes this phase, s/he will continue to live in the host culture. If not, then s/he will return to the native culture (Lennox, 2003)

In this phase of the adjustment process, new people find themselves depressed. The newcomer also views members of the host culture as simply not understanding his/her situation and often responds to this perceived lack of understanding with dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger. During this period, the individual often sees the members of the host culture critically and responds negatively. In addition, feelings of loneliness and homesickness are quite frequent and sometimes exaggerated (Lennox, 2003).

Stage Three: *Superiority*

Now the newcomer achieves small victories in work and daily life, and his/her feelings of competency rapidly expand. One may also begin to make accommodations to the host culture's behavioral patterns. Consequently, this stage is often referred to as the "recovery" phase. The newcomer also begins to use humor as a tool for dealing with the problems encountered in daily life. Frequently, the guest's humorous comments and jokes contain subtle indications of a superior attitude toward members of the native culture (Lennox, 2003).

Stage Four: *Acceptance*

This phase is characterized by the continuing development of a constructive and positive attitude towards the host culture. One is beginning to feel comfortable and

competent in the host culture, and the normal ups and downs of life do not disrupt these feelings of comfort and competency. Daily routines are now firmly established, and the newcomer views the customs of the host country as simply another way of life, accepting the customs of the host culture as neither good nor bad, just different (Lennox, 2003).

In this phase, the newcomer uses the host language with facility, but often may have difficulty catching the unspoken meanings in conversations. One also may begin to plan trips with visiting friends and family members to other areas of the host country.

Stage Five: *Acculturation*

If the person achieves this final phase in the cultural adjustment process, s/he begins to enjoy some of the customs of the host culture and starts to incorporate them into daily life. Moving between the host and the native cultures becomes more comfortable, and "home" becomes the country in which the person is residing at that time.

When the newcomer returns to the native culture either temporarily or permanently, s/he will actually miss some aspects of the host culture and will continue to practice some of the aspects of the host culture even when living in his/her native culture (Lenox, 2003).

Culture shock is, to some degree, inevitable. Some situations can be frustrating, so it is helpful to see each encounter as a learning experience and a chance for personal and professional growth and development. The question arises how to adjust successfully to a new culture and feel comfortable. Adjusting to a new country, culture, and academic environment is not easy and can be both exciting and frustrating.

There appears to be a pattern to cultural adjustment, which occurs over a period of several weeks or months. For instance, new students feel excited and happy to be at University of Alaska Fairbanks. Everything is new, challenging, and exhilarating. It is important, however, to recognize what is happening and to realize that such reactions are common. One may face problems unlike those that were faced at home, and the support system upon which one relied at home is not in place here; it is important to build a new one.

Adjustment to another culture is often a long and difficult process, aggravated sometimes for students by the additional stress of being in a very different and demanding educational system. Struggles with thoughts of going home before completing a degree, frustration at language difficulties, and long study periods are common concerns among international students. Dealing with these feelings, rather than ignoring them, is necessary in adjusting successfully to the U.S.

Thus, effective teaching requires the attempt to understand students in the context of their culture, just as they should make efforts to understand the ITA's background. It may be helpful for the adjustment to living and working in the United States if one thinks about U.S. culture as a set of knowledge and skills to be learned. The more one knows about the culture of the U.S. and the more experience one gains, the more sophisticated the approach to U.S. life will become and the less "shock" one will experience.

The United States is a very diverse society – with respect to ethnicity, race, religion, socioeconomic status, language, customs, backgrounds, interests, and the like –

and that may result in renewed culture shock, even after one has been in the country for a few years.

American values and assumptions

Living in a foreign country, teaching American students, and adjusting to a new culture can be a very rewarding experience, but trying if one does not understand the values of the society. This set of assumptions are adapted from the first 19 pages of Gary Althen's book, *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine, 1988.

Althen says that as people grow up, they learn certain values and assumptions from their parents and other relatives, their teachers, books, newspapers, and television programs. In some cultures, for example, people are taught that men and women should inhabit separate social worlds, with some activities in the men's domain and others clearly in the women's. In other cultures that value is not taught, or at least not widely. Men and women are considered to have equal access to most roles in the society. Assumptions are the unquestioned "givens" about people, life, and "the way things are."

Althen (1988) continues that people who grow up in a particular culture share certain values and assumptions. That does not mean they share these values to exactly the same extent; it means that most of them, most of the time, agree with each other's ideas about what is right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, and so on. They also agree, mostly, with each other's assumptions about human nature, social relationships, and so on.

The following values and assumptions overlap and support each other, fitting together. A culture can be viewed as a collection of values and assumptions that go together to shape the way a group of people perceive and relate to the world around them (Althen, 1988).

Individualism and privacy

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to "individualism." Americans are trained since early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They have not been trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, tightly interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or other collective.

For most Russians, the word individualism is synonymous with the word selfishness (Zatsepina, & Rodriguez, 2000) or self-interest. From their perspective, Americans live primarily for self. However, to most Russians, when teenagers leave home for college this means that they do not care about their parents and that parents do not care about their children anymore. From this point the role of the independent child is to try to make a lot of money, to get a profitable job, to succeed in finding valuable friends, and as Kohls writes "think that they are completely and marvelously unique and wonderful" (Kohls, quoted in Zatsepina, & Rodriguez, 2000).

To understand the Russian thinking about this, one must be aware of what has been happening in Russian middle class families. Children are taken care of for a much longer time by their parents than in the US. Recently more young people have begun to make some money on their own, but even just five years ago it was impossible for the

majority of them to do so and very often it was the case that parents took care, not only of their own children, but also of their own grandchildren, who in many cases, live with them. This behavior was taken for granted as the economic situation didn't allow young parents to provide enough for their family to live independently from the parents.

It is uncommon for Russians to talk about individualism and privacy, because for a long period of time it was even dangerous to express one's point of view, to stand out. The situation has changed, but people don't understand yet, as the previous behavior turned into value systems and still now people don't respect joint belongings or state property. The philosophy was simple: joint means nobody's, so people do not respect what belongs to others. Now there are great changes in Russia, so the crisis will force people to change old values and to choose new ones to cope with problems successfully.

Equality

In the American Declaration of Independence it is written, "all men are created equal." In spite of the fact that sometimes Americans violate the ideal in their daily lives, particularly in matters of interracial relationships, they believe that,

> in some way all people (at least all U.S. American people) are of equal value, and that no one is born superior to anyone else. "One man, one vote," they say, meaning that any person's opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person's opinion. (Althen, 1988, p. 8)

Americans are generally quite uncomfortable when someone treats them with obvious deference. It is not only males who are created equal in the American conception, but females also. Americans make distinctions among themselves as a result

of such factors as sex, age, wealth, or social position but the distinctions are acknowledged in different ways, namely: tone of voice, order of speaking, choice of words, seating arrangements. These are the means by which Americans acknowledge status differences among themselves (Althen, 1988).

Informality

The notion of equality leads Americans to be quite informal in their general behaviors and relationships with others. The informality of American speech, especially the common use of the first name, dress, and posture can be quite shocking to some international students. As a result, such informal behavior can puzzle foreign visitors who hold high stations in countries where it is not assumed that "all men are created equal." Althen (1988) says:

> The superficial friendliness for which Americans are so well known is related to their informal, egalitarian approach to other people. "Hi!" they will say to just about anyone. "How ya doin?" (That is "How are you doing?" or "How are you?"). This behavior reflects less of a special interest in the person addressed than a concern for showing that one is a 'regular person'. (p. 10)

Time and it's control, action, work.

For Americans, time is a "resource" that can be used well or poorly. As indicated by Kohls (1984), American language is filled with references to time, giving a clear indication of how much it is valued. "Time is something to be on, to be kept, filled, saved, used, spent, wasted, lost, gained, planned, given, made the most of, even 'killed'" (Kohl, as cited in Zatsepina, 2000). Americans admire a "well organized" person, one

who has written lists of things to do and a schedule for doing them. The ideal person is punctual and is considerate of other people's time. For instance, here at the UAF campus, classes begin and should end on time. Coming late to some classes may be punished by deducting points.

"He's a hard worker," one American might say in praise of another. Or "she gets the job done." Many Americans are "workaholics" and very conscious about time and money. Many of them get paid by the hour for the work they do. The idea that time is money has become so ingrained that it affects their whole lives. Wasting time is as bad as wasting money, so they schedule everything and hurry everywhere.

The American attitude towards time is not necessarily shared by others, especially non-Europeans who are more likely to conceive of time as something that is simply there around them, not something they can "use." One of the more difficult things many foreign students must adjust to in the States is the notion that time must be saved whenever possible and used wisely every day.

Also one may notice that the first question one American generally asks another American when meeting them for the first time is related to his or her work: "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?"

Directness and assertiveness

Americans generally consider themselves to be frank, open, and direct in their dealings with other people. "Let's stop playing games and get to the point," they say. This and many other common phrases convey the American idea that people should explicitly state what they think and what they want from other people.

If they do not speak openly about what is on their minds, they often convey their reactions in nonverbal ways (without words, but through facial expressions, body positions, and gestures). Americans are not taught, as people in many other countries are, that they should mask their emotional responses. Their words, the tone of their voices, or their facial expressions usually reveal when they are feeling angry, unhappy, confused, or happy and content.

A Russian TA in the UAF Classroom

Many American schools are heterogeneous, and one should not assume that the students have a common academic background. Unlike educational systems in many parts of the world, American schools have no standard curriculum and there is no single test for the mastery of a shared body of knowledge. It is expected that students in class have demonstrated their ability to succeed in college, but they may not already have what one considers a strong academic background. Because there is no standard curriculum, faculty members and TAs designing courses face the problem of figuring out not only how to teach American students, but what to teach them.

A student attitude that can be disconcerting to both American and international TAs is student apathy or lack of interest in course material. Commonly, TAs expect undergraduate students to be highly motivated in their studies, but there are many undergraduate students who exhibit apathetic behavior in the classroom. One way of explaining this is that TAs often teach lower division courses, which students must take in order to fulfill general requirements needed for graduation. Such courses are often out of the students' area of emphasis and also out of their area of interest. As a result, these

students may show little motivation for the course other than the motivation to receive a passing grade. Even if International Teaching Assistants provide cultural diversity, this cultural diversity can lead to misunderstanding and difficulty in a teaching situation.

Another factor which may affect student motivation is the degree to which students have clear future goals. The majority of undergraduates enter into higher education directly after high school. Many of them have not yet defined an academic area of interest and may not have declared an academic major. No doubt that students will not all have the same level of interest, and some students do not even know why they are in higher education at all.

While researching the related literature I discovered that there is lack of information about the interactive relationship between U.S. American students and Russian ITAs in particular. Because I wish to gain a rich understanding of American undergraduate students' experience of taking Communication courses with Russian TAs and at the same time Russian TAs experience of teaching in American classrooms I used conversational interviews as a method of data collection for this study.

"*Perhaps one of the challenges of entrepreneurship research is that we may have to invent some new technologies of doing research in this area if you truly want to understand this domain*"

S. Venkataraman (Sarasvathy 2000, p.37).

CHAPTER TWO:

METHODOLOGY

This research seeks to understand the perceived communication problems between Russian Teaching Assistants and American undergraduate students in American college communication classrooms using narrative methodology. While the terms "narrative" and "narrative research" appear often in qualitative studies, it is rare to find these terms defined (Lieblich, 1998; Riessman, 1993). According to Webster's Dictionary (1966), a narrative is defined as "a discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings" (p. 1503). Barthes (1977, p. 79) remarks that narrative is "simply there like life itself." Everywhere we look, we find stories of what has happened and what might happen. Stories are the essence of lived experience. Sarbin (1986) stresses the organizational aspect of narrative saying

> That [it] is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening. (p. 9)

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) and her colleagues offer the following definition:

> narrative research refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters). It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality. (p. 2)

Education researchers Connelly and Clandinin (1988) emphasize "narrative is the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future" (p. 24).

Lieblich et al. (1998) point out that in order to select research methods to best fit the research question,

> when researchers are asked by various social agencies to address real-life problems, to contribute their expertise to public debates or decisions, it may be advisable to approach people whose lives are relevant to the issue in an open manner, exploring their subjective, inner experience on the matter at hand. Narrative methods can be considered "real world measures" that are appropriate when "real life problems" are investigated. (p. 5).

People tell and are told what is good and bad, normal and abnormal, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, and thus they communicate with each other about all aspects of human existence. The way people communicate about their lives leads to description about their lived experience. Thus stories people tell turn out to be the data in qualitative research.

In his book, *InterViews*, Kvale (1996) describes two classifications of interviewers metaphorically as "miners" and "travelers" (p. 3). The interviewer as miner is seeking to unearth some knowledge buried within the subject of the interview. The traveler, on the other hand, is journeying through the other's landscape gathering stories to retell when he or she arrives back home.

> The two metaphors—of the interviewer as a miner or as a traveler—represent different concepts of knowledge formation. Each metaphor stands for alternative genres and has different rules of the game. In a broad sense, the miner metaphor pictures a common understanding in modern social sciences of knowledge as "given." The traveler metaphor refers to a postmodern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research. The miner metaphor brings interviews into the vicinity of human engineering; the traveler metaphor into the vicinity of the humanities and art. (p. 5).

Whether traveler or miner, it is essential for the researcher to provide a facilitating context to encourage those who are interviewed to tell complete stories about important moments in their lives. Mishler (1986) suggests open-ended questions which allow

participants to construct answers collaboratively with the listener in ways that they find them meaningful.

Since this research focuses on understanding student's experiences in taking Communication courses at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and ITAs' experiences of teaching American undergraduates, conversational interview and narrative methodology are well suited for this study.

Co-researchers

According to Kvale (1996), 15 ± 10 participants is the most commonly used number of participants for this form of qualitative research. A researcher should interview as many subjects as necessary to obtain essential descriptive data on the topic of interest. For this research eight American undergraduate students of Communication 131x and Communication 141x courses and two Russian TAs from the Department of Communication were recruited and interviewed. Co-researchers were students who had taken the required University communication course from a Russian TA; either myself or another ITA. None of the actual questions, probes and such, were questions that might strain the relationship between the co-researcher and the researcher. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I chose participants taking these courses which are required as a component of the UAF Core Curriculum, required of every student at the University, and additionally, I, too, am an International Graduate Teaching Assistant responsible for teaching these courses.

All participants were assured of confidentiality, told that each respondent would be audio taped, and that all the tapes would be kept secure in the Department of

Communication, and that only the researcher and his advisor would have the access to the tapes. The participants were asked to provide a pseudonym in order to prevent interviewees from being identified. It was also explained that participants could withdraw from the interview process at any time, by informing me, without being penalized.

All the interviews took place in the Department of Communication. The area of the interviews was discussed with each participant before the interview process and everyone agreed that the most comfortable place would be the Department of Communication consultation room. Each interview began with the participant signing the consent form (Appendix A).

Interviews

I informed all the participants about my project and asked them to say a few words about themselves before I started the interview conversation. All participants were 18 years of age and older and care was taken to recruit participants of different ages. Equal numbers of females and males were chosen to participate (i.e., 4 females and 4 males among American undergraduate students). Both Russian TAs are female graduate students.

The interview conversations lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Before each interview I thanked each participant for his/her time in participating, and having signed the consent forms, we spoke a few minutes about our student experiences of study at UAF and other topics. The process was opened in this way because I wanted to help the participants feel at ease in sharing information. Each interview was audio recorded using a cassette recording device, which resided inconspicuously on the table between us.

Narrative Analysis

The aim of the narrative inquiry as a qualitative method is to understand rather than to explain (Kramp, forthcoming). Narrative inquiry changes the question philosopher Richard Rorty identifies as the epistemological question that has historically preoccupied Anglo-American philosophy, from "How do we come to know the truth?" to "How do we come to endow experience with meaning?" (Rorty, quoted in Bruner, 1986, p. 12). Kramp reports:

> In response to the invitation the researcher extends to the participant to "Tell me about," active subjects construct a narrative that is particular, personal, and contextualized in time and place. Having heard the narrative or having been told the story, the researcher uses any one of a variety of frameworks to analyze and interpret its meaning and understand the phenomenon s/he is researching. Through narrative inquiry one gains access to the personal experiences of the storyteller who frames and reveals life as experienced in a narrative structure we call story. In narrative inquiry this story is the basic unit of analysis. (Kramp, forthcoming, p. 2)

Polkinghorne (1995) defines narrative analysis as:

> ... the procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account [developmental in the sense of implicating an always-changing, dynamic organization]. The process of narrative analysis is actually a synthesizing of the data rather than a separation of it into its constituent parts. (p.15)

Thus analyzing narratives is an ongoing process, which requires a great deal of listening and relistening, reading and rereading, till the common themes emerge from the participants' stories. Narrative analysis can be applied to any form of textual data, such as that provided by diaries, journals, or written accounts of critical incidents, in addition to data generated from interviews. Interviews appear to be the most often used source of storied narratives in contemporary narrative inquiry. Mishler (1986) reports that "interviewees' responses will often be given as stories. He notes that people frequently understand and recapitulate their experiences in storied form. If the interviewer will not suppress the interviewee's responses by limiting the answers to what is relevant to a narrowly specified question, a storied answer will be provided" (Mishler, quoted in Polkinghorne, D. E., 1995, p. 11).

Nevertheless, the demands on interviewers in the generation of interviewees' personal stories as data are complex and taxing (Young & Tardif, 1992). The orally generated stories need to be transcribed and, thereby, transformed into written text for analysis. That is, they must be "textualized" for "only in textualized form do data yield to analysis" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 95).

Each story has a beginning, middle, and end, which can be identified (Riessman, 1993). Thus reading and reviewing the texts the emergent themes will appear and the meaning of the lived experience the researcher is looking for will be found in these themes. Then the researcher works with the text until the particular themes in each narrative emerge and become clear. That means the main point or meaning that the teller wishes to convey can be determined.

"The themes that reveal themselves to the researcher in each narrative are like 'threads' that, when woven together, create a pattern with a plot-like structure" (Kramp, forthcoming, p. 14). And the researcher's task is to notice these themes by reading and listening to the narrative.

Researcher as tool

My first experience of teaching was in Russia, the country where I was educated and where I taught English to Russian high school students. The second part of my teaching continued from September, 2002, to the present, throughout which I have been teaching Comm 131x and 141x to American students at UAF. The experience of teaching in such different educational environments has been immensely enriching.

One of the major challenges for me was to overcome the fear of teaching in English. I began with the belief that spoken English would not be problematic, but the situation changed when I began to teach in a classroom filled with 25 American undergraduate students who were not so tolerant of my accent. Also, after a few weeks I realized that language was not the most important issue; that is, culture was. American students express their feelings and thoughts about the class more directly in comparison to Russian students.

During my teaching tenure with American students I evaluated my teaching strategies and tried every semester to find new pedagogical approaches. Sometimes I blamed myself if students did not understand the material, were not interested in the course, or wrote their exams badly. One of my weaknesses is lecturing, in that I do not consider myself the most effective when standing at a lectern in front of the class and

speaking one hour. Teaching in the United States requires an active interaction between the teacher and the students, so I learned to be more discussion-oriented rather than entirely focused on lecturing. This active participation in discussion is very useful in understanding the course material for the teaching assistants as well as the students.

Of course, one should evaluate various teaching methods, but one should not forget that teaching and learning are shared responsibilities between teacher and student, which is what I attempted to accomplish during my teaching time in the American classroom.

The major purpose … of learning about other cultures is to discover the ways in which other groups of human beings have organized their lives to answer the perennial questions of survival and fulfillment.

Confucius said, "The nature of people is always the same; it is their habits which separate them." (Fersh, 1989)

CHAPTER THREE:

Description of Co-researchers' Narratives

Isaiah's Narrative Interview

The first co-researcher, Isaiah, is 23 years old and has lived in Alaska his entire life. He has attended the University of Alaska Fairbanks since spring, 2002, majoring in Human Services and expects to graduate in spring of 2004. He says he has not decided yet whether to get another degree in Psychology or Special Education, working with people with special needs, which is the area in which he works now. As he says, "It depends on where wind of change takes me."

Currently he is an early morning seminar teacher (i.e., religious educator) for the Church of Jesus Christ, which is a voluntary position in the mornings from 7:30 until 11:00 every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Isaiah says he considers his teaching a hobby because he really enjoys it. He also likes cross-country skiing and anything that has to do with the outdoors; for example, hunting and fishing. He considers himself an Alaskan in that sense.

When asked to recall his experience with Russian TAs, he states that having seen a Russian TA teaching American students, he started remembering his time in Russia.

Isaiah acknowledged that he might be biased because he used to live in Russia for two years and thus got used to how Russians behave, particularly their nonverbal communication.

Because of the fact that Communication is so vital to American society, and there are so many people here who have not communicated with someone from another country, and because such communication is difficult, Isaiah became determined to stay in the classroom. He said he had no thoughts as to whether a Russian TA might be crazy to want to teach the Communication discipline to American students. "But," he said, "it would be cool; interesting."

He states that he believes his teaching is helpful because it gets other people to step out of their comfort zone and experience communication across cultures. For Isaiah, it is not a big surprise to have a Russian TA in an American classroom, and reports being comfortable having a Russian TA as the instructor and says that the experience was a curiosity. He says he thought it would be fun to see how an International TA deals with American students.

Isaiah considers difference in culture as strength, saying it helps to understand a concept in different ways because the way Russian TAs understand something and the way s/he presents it is different enough to offer a different perspective on ideas:

> Another thing is if you have the same people that think the same as the same culture. They are gonna see it in different ways but with the same parameters whereas Russian TA is coming from a different area and you are gonna look at it differently… and it gives the different perspective… so I think it's definitely a

> strength. It's because of your cultural background it stimulates growth…because for people to grow and to gain communication skills they need to step out of their comfort zone and whereas having foreign TAs it helps to stimulate... to step out of that comfort zone… especially because you had to deal with the language barrier that is there and so… to see … Hey, I am doing it… from another culture. So it's easier to see that and it's motivating.

Isaiah points out that from what he observed from the class, it takes 3 weeks for everybody in the classroom to be able to fully understand the foreign TA. He adds that it is easier to understand how American TAs speak and where the emphasis is placed, whereas foreign TAs place emphasis on different areas, subjects, or ideas. He also reports that he understood assignment instructions, but at the same time noticed that other students seemed not to do so. Isaiah says that Russian TAs are not really vocal and that is the difference in where they pause, which is why it was hard for some American students to understand. Besides, he says, there are other students who got used to American TAs and who don't have to put any effort into understanding the Russian way of speaking.

Also, Isaiah adds that he can and did see frustration, both from the Russian TA and from American students. He says he noticed how the Russian TA was overcoming the cultural barrier, but at the same time could see that other students were frustrated. When I ask Isaiah to offer some suggestions he tells me that when asking for the assignment or expectations, to probe for questions and then explain again that we come from different backgrounds and so we are going to learn together.

Sarah's Narrative Interview

Sarah is my second co-researcher. She is a Civil Engineering student and this is her second year at UAF, but her fifth year in college. She has lived in Alaska most of her life except for 3 years in Oregon while she attended college there.

She begins the interview by describing her first impression of having a Russian TA for a teacher, and how it is possible that a Russian TA can teach Communication courses to American students. She confesses that it did surprise her, but at the same time it did not really affect the class too much because it was not a language class but rather a speaking class! Besides, as she states, she does not have a problem with understanding Russian accents. Later she surmises that she used to live in Delta where there are many Russian people. That is why, she says, she did not perceive the need to switch to another section of Communication with an American TA.

When asked if it is good that Russian TAs teach Communication courses to American students, she answers "why not." According to her, if any International TA can speak the language, even if s/he has an accent, but understands what's going on in the class, but nevertheless, if able to understand students then why not teach the course s/he wants to? Sarah says that it is fine to have a Russian TA teach Communication courses in that it makes a lot of difference. She adds that students get frustrated with almost any teacher or TA, not only ITAs.

Sarah reveals that she had other international TAs (e.g., from India) and mentions that a Russian accent is not that strong as compared with an Indian TA's accent. She repeats that it might be because she got used to a Russian accent in that she is from Delta

where there are a lot of Russians and thus perhaps she was already accustomed to Russian language to some degree.

Sarah relates that she found her Russian TA to be much more easy-going than her Indian TA, who was stricter as most of the subjects were in her engineering major. As she says, the,

> Russian TA made the class interesting and certainly made some things to remember longer. And even if it is a required course where students may not have motivation it makes it pleasant if something interesting is going on in the class. I could see that the Russian TA I had in my class learned almost as much as we did over the course and especially about American culture and slang as it is a part of communication. In general it was not difficult to communicate with a Russian TA because he had a good concept of language.

Sarah mentions that the International TAs she had, including the Russian, tended to be a little bit more formal in their teaching styles, whereas American TAs were more laid-back and relaxed. She says she does not know whether it is a good thing or bad thing.

According to Sarah, the language barrier of idiomatic speech is the biggest problem for International TAs. She states that it is not their fault because it is not their native language. She shares that,

> it is a little bit harder to communicate between languages because some of the concepts are not translated very well and there are a lot of phrases that are not translated in other languages in the same way. I, personally, do not think it affects

> the ability to teach as long as the ITAs are willing to listen and try to understand what the student says and the student is willing to explain. But I noticed the problem with some Indian TAs is that they do not understand American students' questions though I cannot say so about the Russian TA I had.

Sarah says that the difference between International TAs and American TAs that she has had is that most of the ITAs are much more focused on their jobs, as compared with American TAs. She thinks that International TAs, including the Russian, pay more attention to what they are doing than most American TAs. Sarah says she believes that ITAs tend to be better graders and they write more comments on student papers.

Sarah continues then, recalling that her Russian TA had seemed to be uncomfortable for the first week or two of classes and says:

> At first he was a little bit nervous during the first 2-3 classes and his teaching style was sort of different like he stood in front of the class and spoke. But after that period of time he became more interactive and more comfortable talking in front of the class. So it took a couple of weeks or so.

Sarah explains that usually the issue is understanding the language. She clarifies that students get frustrated if the TA does not understand them and the ITA gets frustrated because students do not understand him or her.

By the end of the interview Sarah gives me a piece of advice, suggesting that I speak louder, enough to be heard in the classroom size, and a little bit slower. She finishes, saying she enjoyed the class she had with a Russian TA.

Dave's Narrative Interview

Dave is a 22 year old student who has been attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks for 3 years, majoring in Accounting. He began the interview by pointing out the weaknesses he noticed his Russian TA had:

> It appeared to me that at the beginning of the semester our Russian TA did not have as much confidence as it appeared later. So some students seemed to manipulate him (e.g., how harshly he graded them). I remember that every now and then he came to class having the same routine (i.e., saying hello, taking attendance). And it did look like there was lack of confidence. I don't know…. perhaps Russian TAs do not recognize the power they have in the classroom. The teacher is the God of the classroom [raising his hands widely] but it did not seem that students recognized the Russian TA's authority though there was eagerness in whatever he was pursuing.

Dave says that the biggest thing is the language barrier and adds that it was hard to distinguish whether it was the Russian TA's first semester of teaching or whether it was because of the Russian TA himself:

> It looks like he knew exactly what he wanted to say because he was prepared, read the material, teaching manuals or whatever he had… but because of lack of confidence or maybe the nervousness, he got caught. [Here Dave gets emotional] You are like 25 years old and here are the same college students, you know. But again, as a teacher you could have said: "This is the way it is. Like it or Not," you

know. It did look like you were the guest but not a teacher though... Hey, you are the teacher… you are the God in the classroom.

Dave remembers the TA said a couple of times:

My boss told me, you know… to tell you this/that. But students don't like to hear that. They'd like to know you are in charge! [and keeps stressing these words] You are the one! The boss! You are the one who knows the material and if there's a problem you don't have to run and ask if it's ok. You are the leader, you know. If you have doubts or fear then the students in the classroom are gonna doubt your ability to lead the class. I think there were two times. So more confidence!

Like Sarah, Dave mentions that it took about 3 weeks for his Russian TA to get used to the classroom environment. Dave states that the TA did not give up, although students put a lot of pressure on him in classroom setting. Students "gave him hell, but he stuck with it."

According to Dave, the idea of having a Russian TA is kind of awkward. It is unexpected to have a Russian teach American students.

Actually, the fact that a TA from the different culture, whether it's Russia, Japan or whatever came to teach Americans opens the process to stereotyping. It's just that fact alone that can create hostility and students can try to push International TAs. Students hear the accent, notice that the TA pauses for a while, and by the time s/he says something, some students have already become frustrated.

Dave acknowledges that though he usually stayed pretty neutral in the class nevertheless the instructions were not completely clear to him, and he says it could be because they were not well organized:

> Sometimes I just did not know what to expect. Maybe it was language…
>
> A lot of students come to class and they expect the TA will teach whether s/he came from Russia or another country. Everybody hates [the required core curriculum] Communication [class] and there will be someone who will be causing problems. That is why TAs should have been stricter (i.e., put their foot down).

When Dave was asked why he stayed in the class during the first two days of classes when he had a chance to switch sections he answers:

> It goes back to the reason that if you see the teacher in the classroom you instinctively, automatically, think that they know what they are doing and that they have the experience to teach whatever that subject is. At least the TA, even if s/he is international, must know what s/he is talking about. Well… I thought some of the things would be easier, for example, that the TA won't catch some things in the classroom [smiling].

Like Isaiah and Sarah, Dave concludes his interview with a recommendation for the Russian or any other international TA:

> Even if you have no clue what you are doing in a classroom … act like you do!
>
> Who cares if you don't know something… As long as the students see the leader they follow him anywhere. Maybe more examples of speeches… it would be

helpful… My wife took a Communication class but her class was much harder. It was with an American TA…

Amie's Narrative Interview

Amie is woman in her forties who was raised in Ohio and has two children. She has been in Alaska for 21 years.

Amie began her interview by characterizing the Russian TA she had in her Communication course. She found him very friendly, with a great sense of humor, and feels he made a very strong effort. He did not let his students run over him which is good because, as Amie states, they tried to do that. Because of the effort the Russian TA put into class the whole semester was, for her, very interesting. It was better to have a Russian TA as compared to an American because students learned more about communication as a discipline and got acquainted with Russian culture.

Amie says she considers humor as being an universal communication form and she adds that the TA she had in her Communication class did a very good job, culture-wise, and with a sense of humor. She begins to laugh before she says, "He was really busy… like a soaking sponge… and it was fun to watch him growing and taking on different aspects of American culture."

Like previous co-researchers, Amie finds the language barrier to be the biggest communication problem. Though she says the accent never bothered her, because the TA always repeated himself when something was not clear, but at the same time she explains:

> for Americans the order of the words would be very important and the use of articles too. Otherwise it would change the meaning. But in spite of this difficulty the TA was trying very hard to follow the lesson plan and it can be definitely said that persistence and how hard he tried to do the best job he could may be considered as a major strength.

When asked about how long it took for her Russian TA to get used to the new class, Amie says that the first week he was uncomfortable, but it did not last long and that in three weeks it was evident that the TA had become confident.

Amie found that her Russian TA had a hard time giving grades, saying,

> I remember there was one time when we had our diagnostic speech and some students tried very hard to give good speeches. But when it was already the third speech and it still was a "C," then it became difficult for the TA to explain why still "C" and not "B."

Amie says she could not recall any difficulties that happened with her. She surmises that it could be because the TA was easier to talk to or, as she adds, she scared him a couple of times because she was willing to talk to him. Also she states, her Russian TA was very approachable as compared to American TAs. She remembers that if any of the students ever had anything to talk about, the Russian TA always made himself available:

> And at the same time it is not the TA's job to baby-sit. Even if people pay money, but do not put any effort themselves into study, then maybe there's no need to go into college, you know…

As compared with the previous co-researcher, Dave, Amie says that her Russian TA was a Department of Communication puppet, but not for class. She reports that:

> at the same time he was not too easy and was quite strict. I don't know if anybody who stayed in that class did not like the TA. We all enjoyed the class very much and we were all comfortable with him. I do remember I was really concerned about my grade, but I told myself that he came all the way from Russia to teach our class and that I would stick with him and would give him some support and let him do his job.

As Amie states, her Russian TA was only two years older than her daughter. She surmises his youth might be one reason she decided to give him support and help him at times, seeing how hard the young man was trying to deal with the whole class.

At the end of the interview Amie acknowledges that it probably is not a good idea to have a foreign TA teach the required courses the way the Department of Communication has those courses set up. She finishes "If the Department changed the guidelines to emphasize cross-cultural communication then there would be great need for that."

Steve's Narrative Interview

Steve, my fifth co-researcher, is an eighteen year old freshman who has lived in Alaska his entire life. His major is undeclared at the moment, but he says he wants to get a degree either in History or Psychology. He states that he moved to Fairbanks because it is the best school in the state for what he wants to do. One might surmise that Steve has

never been interviewed before, based on how long it took him to answer questions. He seemed to be uncomfortable.

Steve began the interview by saying that there is no big difference between American TAs and Russian ones. Though he acknowledges that there may be a language barrier and different reactions but [laughed], basically believes they are all people and thus all the same. He adds immediately that Russian TAs are very helpful and really want American students to learn and to understand different concepts, saying,

> There were some American TAs who gave information without any clarification and were just going on. But with my Russian TA it was different. He tried to make sure that everyone in the classroom understood exactly what he meant. The result of it was that it was more helpful because some other TAs did not do that.

Steve reports that he chanced to have another International TA, from Korea, but says the Korean TA did not talk much because there was a professor who was primarily in charge of the class. It was a big class with over two hundred students, and the TA was only in charge of quizzes and thus communicated very little with the students, though his language skills were okay.

Compared with previous co-researchers, Steve does not consider the language barrier to be the major weakness, saying that he understood the Russian TA and [begins to laugh before saying]:

> The TA understood English better than all of the students put together would understand Russian. Of course, there were cases when the TA did not understand some aspects of language and then we tried to explain to him and vice versa. So it

was understandable. Also the Russian TA could take a lot more stress than other TAs, who I had. Having a lot of patience is also a plus for the Russian TA.

In comparison with previous co-researchers Steve states that it took the Russian TA only 3-4 classes to get used to the classroom environment and new students, and to be more confident. Steve remembers that he was surprised when one student came on the third day of classes and the TA said that he could not be in that class because of the Department's policies and [here Steve is raising his voice] it was clear that the student was angry. Steve acknowledges that if he were a TA, it would be very tough for him to tell a student that s/he had been dropped from the class.

Steve recalls that there were times when it was hard to understand what his Russian TA was saying:

> Sometimes he would be talking and someone started not paying attention. Then we had to concentrate on what he was saying again. Besides, sometimes it was difficult to understand the TA because of the way class was sitting. It was a semi-circle pattern and there were times when the TA was talking to one side while the opposite side could not hear clearly because of his accent.

When asked about any problems Steve had with the Russian TA he says:

> I had problems with the class. Not with the TA. I hated my class. I am sorry everybody is listening to this, but everybody hates communication(s) [the core curriculum, required basic course]. No matter who is teaching it.

Steve admits he was lucky because he had a very strong group in spite of the fact that the group was large, consisting of eight members. He explains that the problem was

that some group members lived 10 to15 miles off campus; however, the group trusted everybody would get their assignments done.

By the end of the interview Steve said that he did not really know what was happening to him during the first two weeks of being in the class:

> I thought I had trouble speaking in front of a small group but it turned out to be not so because everyone got to know each other pretty quickly and as it was a small groups class, it was easier, even though mine was the largest group in the class.

Steve concluded that he really enjoyed being in his group, and added, as an afterthought, that his Russian TA dressed better than the normal American dress.

Carly's Narrative Interview

Carly, nineteen years old, was the last co-researcher interviewed among the American undergraduate students. It was really interesting to talk to her, as she revealed many details of her biography and gave me considerable information for my research. From the first few minutes I could tell that she was comfortable in interview situations. She was born in New Jersey and, due to the fact that her father is in the military, they moved often. Since my father was also in the military, we chatted for several minutes about this commonality of childhood. Having spent a few years in Berlin, she went to a German preschool and it was there that she had her first intercultural experience. Her family then moved back to the states and she moved to Alaska in 2003. That was her first year of being a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and she chanced to have a female Russian TA who taught her Communication 131x course.

Carly continues the interview by saying that growing up in American schools was very interesting because most of the teachers were very open and friendly and did not mind talking to the students after class. What she says she noticed with her Russian TA was that the TA maintained a greater distance between the students and herself. The classroom relationship seemed to be more formal and professional and she saw that many students and she herself "were not quite used to it. It was not a bad thing, but it was kind of shocking at first."

Carly says they could tell that the TA knew about the subject, but the problem was that though her English was not bad, her sentences were grammatically arranged much differently than American usage. Carly reports that it took her a few minutes to process what the TA was saying and that the students initially had a great distrust about the TA's knowledge because she could not convey information to the students in a manner they could understand. Carly mentioned that students perceived the TA to be very nervous and that it appeared as if she was very intimidated by being in class full of American students. There were some students who just assumed that because the TA could not communicate properly, she was "dumb or stupid which was totally uncool." There were times when the TA seemed to withdraw and just let students "do their thing." Carly recalls the TA said:

> If you don't understand … read the book!!! And the book has everything in it. And I read the book every night and say: OK, she is not stupid… everything she says complies with the book [laughing]. Pretty much by the way anybody treated the TA one could tell if students read the book or not. Which is a terrible way to speak about my peers but….[laughing].

Carly reveals that she got an "A" for the course and says it was not really hard to get this grade because she has given many speeches during her life:

> I had to polish my style a little bit and the TA did a very good job helping me to do so. The TA always was up in the office. She put her office hours on the board and syllabus, and she always stayed a few minutes in the classroom to answer questions and that is why everyone could say she was accessible and helped me a lot.

Carly continues remembering how everybody in the class was very shocked after the first diagnostic speech. Carly confesses that American people in particular hate to get up and give speeches:

> So they would get up and hug the podium and talk, and then they would expect to get a good grade because the teacher did not speak English well by herself. There were some folks I saw who got low grades, but I thought they did really well and I know they were very upset. And then I was kind of upset too. But I left it to students because it was not my business and, after all, the TA is the teacher and I am just a student. I don't know… perhaps, students forgot about hierarchy in the classroom.

When asked whether Carly understood her TA's accent, she begins smiling and reveals:

> And I would sit there and … I lived in different foreign countries like Italy and Germany. Spent some time in France. And I heard different accents. I had a lot of experience with people. If they speak in totally different syntax and grammar and things like that… so it took me a little while with her because I've actually pretty

> much had experience with Western grammar versus Eastern world. So that took me a few minutes. But once I kind of got the style of what she was trying to say it was not really hard after that.

Carly confesses, and her voice becomes quiet, that there was one time when she was disappointed with her peers' behavior. She says it was when they were talking about diversity and some students were just talking and talking to each other. Carly says she likes the entire class to be engaged, but she adds that she goes to school to learn and not waste her money. Carly remembers she noticed that her TA was shocked by the students' behavior and how they talked to her and to each other. She clarifies saying, "That was more toward the beginning of the course before we got into groups and did our presentations." Carly surmises that the TA realized she was not controlling the classroom as an instructor should.

One interesting thing Carly says she learned from her Russian TA's class was how much Americans talk as compared to Russians. And her Russian TA was the example:

> It seemed to me that the TA was sitting back and listened a lot more often. And Americans would like to talk before they understood it was not polite. I would recommend to the TA to put her foot down more often and say: Hey! Listen to me! But the problem was that the students would be like: Oh, the teacher is mean to me. The students really whined a lot and I think she really did not want anything bad to come back to her. But I think if she started the class with … Hey,

> this is the class! This is important! Just do what I say. So I think that was the biggest weakness right there… taking control of the classroom.

Compared to other co-researchers, Carly states that it took one or one and a half months for her Russian TA to get used to the classroom environment. Carly thinks that her TA seemed to be very timid and shy most of the time and adds that it could have been the TA's personality or something else, but it took quite a while to get used to her quiet manner in front of the class.

Carly describes how the TA kept eye contact with the students, saying, "Once she determined who was not paying attention she would be like… okay: this student is present and this one is absent. Not paying attention… " Carly suggests that the TA could have said:

> Ok... I am surprised you came to class … now start paying attention. You'd better respect that, you know. As it should be! You know. My mother always tells me, please, respect your instructor because that is the instructor. They know better. Like… I had several bad teachers. Just give the teacher a break!!! They know more than you do, otherwise, they would not be here.

Carly remembers that when she came to UAF there was a student who introduced her around. She asked him what were the required courses and he answered:

> AHHH!!! Communication course! You aren't gonna get an "A" in it! A lot of TAs are Russians and they are terrible and blah-blah-blah-blah. [Carly adds]I won't say his name or anything. He is an only child and maybe snobby. His father

> is an officer. And so his communication style is like: Hey, listen to me! He… he is weird.

Carly relates that one thing which might have gone against her Russian TA is her age. She says that the TA does not look like a professor, but rather like a peer. It seems that the students knew the TA is young and so they took advantage of her lack of experience. Carly says students think that TAs cannot do anything to them because they are like undergraduate students; students do not recognize the authority of an ITA.

Carly remembers how her TA would give quizzes and she and the TA would have arguments. For instance, she remembers she spent 20 minutes arguing over time and then felt very embarrassed. Carly confesses that she was stupid and arrogant and thought that the TA thought:

> Oh! A problem student! And then I thought: Oh, no… I can't make her uncomfortable. She is a guest student in our country and I should not be doing that, you know. And after that, I pretty much tried to remain calm and help her out…. if completely necessary.

Among other difficulties, Carly remembers the difference in communication was significant. She clarifies that she means the tone of the TA's voice. She says she liked how soft spoken the TA was and that everything was so laid-back. Carly adds:

> Kind of monotone. So nobody really understood what the TA was trying to say. But I loved the way she speaks … I could have listened to her for a long time. But just the expression of her voice…. Nobody knew if she was upset… or if she was

this or that…. Oh, maybe she is mad at us ….so then we get very defensive. Her flat voice…yeah…

When asked about the impression Carly had during the first days of taking the class, she begins to describe it very emotionally:

Oh, my Gosh! She speaks English like… No! I am not gonna understand what she is saying! At first I was totally scared because I thought Oh, my GOD, my grades are gonna suffer. Oh, no! And then her voice made me fall asleep… And then I thought… oh, no she is like a communist! Some of the students have jokes, no offense, you know, it's just like how we, Americans, are … we stereotype other countries. But you guys are not offensive …no!

Carly says she thought she was a good speaker prior to taking that course. She describes believing that:

I am a good speaker. I know everything. And then, I learned after a diagnostic speech that I had to work on it still. Actually, the diagnostic speech helped me a lot to gain respect for her…. It was not really a content problem…. I think she understands English a lot better than she speaks it… which is really cool! Some of the students were like: Soooo… we are not supposed to say "um" and she would be like saying it to herself [whispering] "you are not supposed to say." And then she would go like: Well… "Um" is a vocalic filler and "you know" is a verbal filler and she would explain all these words instead of saying: NO! And some of the students were like: Oh, she does not understand us. Even though I was digging my heels in the ground, I was like: OH, no! I should give her a chance! I can

really learn a lot out of this. And I did!!!! You guys have a pretty good Department and they keep everybody on their toes, you know.

At the end of the interview Carly confesses that her Russian TA had really helped her:

> She would nail me on the things I did not do well… She really made me work. I just think she did a really good job and it's just students should put a lot of effort themselves. I think I learned a lot more from a Russian TA than I could out of an American one...

Tatyana and Irina's Narrative Interview

Tatyana has been teaching Communication 131x for four semesters at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Irina was a TA at the Department of Communication two years ago and now she is studying for a PhD at UAF.

Irina begins the interview by saying that she does not remember her first semester in detail, but she recalls that she was really scared because when she began to teach in the U.S. she had no idea what was required of a teacher in the classroom, what was normal, and what was not, plus she had a language struggle. Besides, she states, all American students are different and the attitudes are totally different. She adds that at the same time, the situation in the classroom is more relaxed as compared to Russian classrooms.

Tatyana says that it was not a big surprise to her to teach at the University. She confesses that she had an idea that the experience would be challenging and it would require a lot from her, but not to the extent she experienced. She explains:

> To me it was a continuous ongoing process of stress… I was sorry that I came here. But that was during the first semester only. I never had any negative

> attitudes from students toward me… though I had difficult characters but… I think it's normal… no matter how experienced a teacher you are, you always find students who don't support you… to put it mildly… I did not feel negative acting from the class…

Both co-researchers acknowledge that the first semester was a constant struggle, and that the major problem was grading. They report that the Communication Department has a system of grading that it is pretty well structured and once one looks at it, it does not seem to be complicated. But [Irina] says it is still subjective because students argue about their grades, and the instructor has to explain why this/that grade. They both agree that they were not knowledgeable at that time and could not explain clearly why the student earned this/that grade, but students, however, were eager to hear more details than they could initially provide.

Tatyana states that now after teaching two years would be a perfect time for her to take this course to teach because she says she is more certain of her ability to explain and to talk to students. She says "Even if I am not so clear then at least I can show students that I am."

Both agree that the second semester was much better because, as Irina explains, "Once we taught it, we knew at least where to look at the issue, how to deal with people, what do to if questions arise, and how to manage conflicts and whatever." Irina continues that now they have learned that it is better for them to be in control and say:

> OK, I decide this or that. For example, I assign people what to do rather than letting them choose something, because once students start choosing… it leads to

> problems… Yeah, in terms of grades… I can be more sure why 3 points for this/that competency and I feel more certain in myself as a teacher to say that this is a "3," you know. Because of my experience and bite me [laughing] I was more confident.

Tatyana describes her experience of teaching in a Russian High School and University. She says she never had any questions about why she graded this or that mark, and she adds that students never asked. She says they trusted her because the teacher is the one who knows the subject better than any of them. She explains,

> Students accept something as given and so one does not have to debate… and here in America one has to spend so much time and it is useless. There were some situations when students came to me after class and they would agree with the grade but at the same time got so defensive. [Tatyana expresses their defensiveness by showing her fist].

Irina continues saying that she stopped doing multiple choice quizzes/tests as much as she could, and she clarifies that she had a lot of questions from her students regarding the first mid-term:

> I took a lot of questions from [the Instructor] manual and that author has his own program and what the Department of Communication teaches sometimes does not match the book (i.e., the text is not compatible) and the result of it was that some of the questions were ambiguous. That is why many students kept coming and coming with many complaints.

When asked about the biggest challenges they had to face teaching classes, both co-researchers agreed that it was the language barrier. Irina explains:

> Me… being a non-native speaker and problems associated with it… Sometimes I did not understand what they were saying because of their accents… stumble sometimes and especially when you are in front of the class… it's not mumbling… it's just you lose everything you had in mind.

Tatyana adds:

> We are not fluent… I make pauses… They say: Unnecessary pauses!!! That's what they wrote in that informal feedback. My conversation flow is not so fluent… I should do something about it. It's hard still…to stand in front of the classroom and speak… and in different language… no matter how long you live here… For me the language was the problem sometimes.

They both agreed teaching would have been easier if they did not have to count student absences. Tatyana says it takes too much time and creates pressure, adding that each time she had to make judgments she questioned whether she should have or not. She remembers some students brought in doctors' notices which she could not identify…It's like a tiny piece of paper… no signatures or something and I always had to decide whether it's genuine or not.

During the interview it came up that in Russia, students know that if they don't attend classes they are going to get a lower grade. Tatyana says that here a student may be absent for half the semester and still expect to pass the course! Also, she adds, they can show up a couple of times and then borrow someone's notes and still pass. In this

aspect, American classrooms are very difficult from Russian classrooms. Irina mentions that some American students say they do not have a medical excuse because they do not have money or do not have insurance. And she adds that she was not able to check whether or not this was true.

Both co-researchers agree that the system of points for this/that assignment is more flexible than in Russia. Irina says:

> Let them have points for their work but not for their presence. But you know, there are a lot of things I would change in this course… Since we are not in a position to do so and we probably don't know all the politics that goes behind the scene and I am sure they have reasons why they support instructors so it's hard to judge… And why do we need this evaluation and stuff?

Irina and Tatyana confess that what they liked most of all in teaching American students is that there were a lot of exercises and activities the Department has and that everyone could make copies for each student. Tatyana admits [in a sad voice] "In Russia it would be very problematic to make any kind of visual aids."

Irina says she tried to lecture minimally because the class is an applied course wherein students learn practical skills. She states "if I lectured most of the time I would put students to sleep." Tatyana adds that she tries to lecture certain parts because once she started lecturing something that she was comfortable about, she [Tatyana] had "100 % of students' attention."

It was very interesting to hear both co-researchers descrtibe student behavior in the classroom, especially that some students eat during class. Irina says that by the third

or fourth semester of teaching, she told students they could bring "Pepsi," but no food. She adds that sometimes it was okay if people ate snacks, but she decided not to distinguish between the individuals who were eating pizza from those who were eating snacks. She says that most students did not appreciate others eating in class, especially when someone was presenting a speech. Tatyana volunteers:

> I could not imagine me eating in English class… like us sitting in Russia. There's no time eating here because … because you have to work hard! Once you are in the classroom... even chewing gum… you could be busted by teachers.

Irina adds:

> My friend and I were sitting with a snicker bar and a ruler. We wanted to cut it sharp into two pieces and the teacher noticed that and the result was we were kicked out of the classroom.

At the end of the interview Irina says:

> I firmly believe that foreigners should not be able to teach untill the 2nd semester minimum… because I had noooo clue [shaking her head]! I just did not have any experience… I've never taken a class in my life here… and whatever I had in Russia is totally different. So just to be present as a student yourself here in the class we teach students…. would help…

Narrative Summary

Direct excerpts from the interviews are presented here in order to better convey how eight co-researchers remembered their experience of being in a course taught by a Russian TA. As the researcher, I realize that the analysis will not represent "objective"

truth though it is generally assumed that "telling stories is one of the most significant ways individuals construct and express meaning" (Mishler, 1986, p. 67).

According to du Preeze, "the purpose of narrative analysis is not simply to produce a reproduction of observations; rather, it is to provide a dynamic framework in which the range of disconnected data elements are made to cohere in an interesting and explanatory way" (du Preez, quoted in Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 19).

CHAPTER FOUR:

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is the procedure in which the researcher synthesizes data rather than separates the datum into constituent parts. Such analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them into a plot. The development of a plot follows the same principles of understanding as the notion of the "hermeneutic circle" whereby the creation of a text involves the to-and-fro movement from parts to whole that is involved in comprehending a finished text (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 14):

> As the plot begins to take form, the events and happenings that are crucial to the story's denouement become apparent. The emerging plot informs the researcher about which items from the gathered data should be included in the final storied account. Not all data elements will be needed for the telling of the story. Elements which do not contradict the plot, but which are not pertinent to its development, do not become part of the research result, the storied narrative. This process has been called narrative smoothing. (Spence, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15)

With the tapes of the interviews and the transcripts in hand I began final analysis and interpretation of the stories I had gathered. I started with the tapes and then transcriptions and repeatedly read, re-read, listened, and heard the "stories" I gathered. Sometimes I read a story aloud and tried to familiarize myself with the narrator's language, inflection, and especially the story itself.

In this chapter I reconstruct stories told by my co-researchers into a story I want to share with my readers. As I am an International Teaching Assistant myself, I allow myself to be heard among my co-researchers while interpreting their stories.

In analyzing the interview data, five general themes emerged from the narrative stories of all eight co-researchers. Some co-researchers used metaphors to describe their personal experience, which made interaction livelier. These themes include: Russian TAs' level of assertiveness in the classroom (i.e., lack of confidence), the language barrier, grading difficulties, Russian TAs' enthusiasm, and the ITA getting used to the classroom environment.

Assertiveness in the Classroom

Instructional expectations differ widely from country to country. Formal student-teacher relations may be the norm in some nations (Russia), but this relationship is often not common in the United States. An International TA's reserve and formality in interpersonal relations is often perceived in an American classroom as a lack of self-confidence. For example, Dave recalls, "… perhaps Russian TAs do not recognize the power they have in the classroom. The teacher is the God of the classroom, but it did not seem that students recognized the Russian TA's authority though there was eagerness in whatever he was pursuing. As a teacher one could have said: This is the way it is. Like it or not, you know. It did look like you were a guest, but not a teacher though…."

It is natural to feel overwhelmed by the novelty of our situation; facing a group of American students as their teacher. Some American students expect much more from an International TA, especially when the TA has never taught before in an American

classroom. Irina recalls, "I had no idea what was required of a teacher in the classroom, what was normal, and what was not… I firmly believe that foreigners should not be able to teach till the second semester minimum… because I had noooo clue! I just did not have any experience… I've never taken a class in my life here… and whatever I had in Russia is totally different." Carly mentioned that, "students perceived the TA to be very nervous and that it appeared as if she was very intimidated by being around a bunch of American students. But I think if she started the class with … Hey, this is the class! This is important! Just do what I say. So I think that was the biggest weakness right there… taking control of the classroom."

Language Barrier

Before we entered the University of Alaska Fairbanks as Teaching Assistants, we satisfied the University's minimum competency requirements in the English language. However, participants reported experiencing considerable communication difficulties with our students, especially at the beginning of a course. When describing the language barrier, several co-researchers stated that it was the biggest problem, while others said that it did not really bother them. For example, Carly remembers "Oh, my Gosh! She speaks English like… No! I am not gonna understand what she is saying! At first I was totally scared because I thought Oh, my GOD, my grades are gonna suffer. Oh, no! And then her voice made me fall asleep." Irina says "Me… being a non-native speaker and problems associated with it… it's just you lose everything you had in mind." Tatyana adds: "We are not fluent… I make pauses… They say: Unnecessary pauses!!!" Amie

mentions that the Russian accent never bothered her because if something was not clear the TA repeated the intonation.

At times we may use a word in a specific way and perceive that the students do not understand our point. This may be because of the specific meaning that we have attached to the term. It goes without saying that words have different meanings in different contexts, some of which ITAs may be unaware of, particularly during the first semester of teaching in a new country.

Grading Difficulties

Grading written assignments requires time, work, and judgment. ITAs have to pay careful attention to the need to schedule ample time for reading and grading student work so that each paper will get a fair evaluation. Thus, for instance, Amie recalls, "I remember there was one time when we had our diagnostic speech and some students tried very hard to give good speeches. But when it was already the third speech and it still was a 'C', then it became difficult for the TA to explain why it was still a 'C' and not a 'B'." Irina says "Yeah, in terms of grades… I can be more sure why 3 points for this/that competency and I feel more certain in myself as a teacher to say that this is '3', you know. Because of my experience and 'bite me' I have become more confident. But from the other hand it is still subjective because students can argue about their grades and one has to explain why this/that grade." Tatyana and Irina both admit that they were not knowledgeable when they initially began teaching in the U.S. and could not explain clearly why a student might earn a particular grade. They could explain only in general terms, and students wanted more specific details.

Russian TAs' Enthusiasm

One of the factors which may affect student motivation is the degree to which students have clear future goals. The majority of undergraduates enter into higher education directly after high school. Many of them have not yet defined an academic area of interest and many have not yet declared an academic major. Consequently, some of these students lack motivation and appear apathetic in the classroom. However, for many other students, the subject area of required courses may become a new-found interest. Such students can be strongly influenced by the TA's enthusiasm for an academic subject. For example, Sarah points out that her,

> Russian TA made the class interesting and certainly made some things to remember longer. And even if it is a required course where students may not have motivation, it makes it pleasant if something interesting is going on in the class. Most of the ITAs are much more focused on their jobs as compared with American TAs. ITAs tend to be better graders and they write more comments on student papers.

Dave states that his TA did not give up, although students put a lot of pressure on him in the classroom setting. Students "gave him hell, but he stuck with it." Amie recalls that in spite of the slight language barrier the Russian TA who taught her class tried very hard to carefully follow the lesson plan and that persistence, hard work, and diligence to do the best job he could may be considered as a major strength. Steve adds, "Russian TAs are very helpful and really want American students to learn and to understand different concepts. He tried to make sure that everyone in the classroom understood exactly what

he meant. The result of it was that it was more helpful because some other TAs did not do that."

As an International TA, sometimes I do blame myself when students are not interested in a course or do poorly on an exam. Although it is important to continually examine one's teaching methods, it's also important to remember that teaching and learning are shared responsibilities between teacher and student. However, students do not all have the same level of interest, so ITAs have to accept academic diversity and help those who really want to learn something from the class.

It seems that many American students have no understanding of student responsibility for learning. Displaying genuine interest in the subject matter, incorporated with a sense of humor and enthusiasm into the presentation of the material, can be very beneficial in terms of student interest and retention.

Getting Used to the Classroom Environment

Intercultural experiences in the classroom are important for both American students and their international instructors. At times, students reflect a challenging attitude that can be very disconcerting to teachers unaccustomed to informal teacher-student relationships. More than half the co-researchers for this study agreed that it takes three weeks or less for Russian TAs to get used to the classroom environment and new students. Sarah recalled that her Russian TA seemed to be uncomfortable for the first week or two of classes. He stood in front of the classroom and spoke with the same daily routine. But after that period of time he became more interactive and confident. Amie agreed, saying it took him almost three weeks to get used to the classroom. Compared to

the previous co-researchers, Steve noticed that it took only three to four classes, i.e., less than two weeks for the Russian TA to be comfortable with his students. This descrepancy may be explained by the fact that Steve took the class when his TA had three semesters of teaching experience. Carly recalled that it took about a month and a half for her Russian TA to get used to the class. She surmised that it might have been because of gender differences. This information was interesting because her Russian TA had been teaching American undergraduates for the third semester and should have already gotten used to the classroom environment at this point. On the other hand, American college students obviously are fluent in English and the fact that we, Russian TAs, teach Public Speaking as non-native speakers can certainly be reason for nervousness in front of the classroom.

Summary

The emergent themes regarding the American undergraduate students' perceptions of Russian TAs and vice versa illustrate the interpretive function of stories about interactive relationships between American undergraduate students and Russian TAs.

Students rightfully expect clarity in classroom communication. It is the TA's responsibility to make the extra effort required to be clearly understood. An open discussion of this issue on the first day of class may prevent student uncertainty and help to create an atmosphere in which students feel free to seek clarification whenever it is needed. It is important for International TAs to accept our weaknesses and consciously

build upon our strengths. It is also important to be able to communicate with the students and ask for their help in assisting us in our first experience as an international TA.

Every new teacher faces challenges. For International TAs, the task of teaching includes reaching across different cultural values and assumptions, different educational systems, different native languages, and many other differences. Thus, the challenge is greater, but so is the opportunity.

Being a TA is an ongoing learning process and a test adaptation. One learns how to manage one's own schoolwork and TA work. Russian TAs also learn how to adapt teaching styles to different classroom environments and that there's no one right way to make a class interesting or rewarding. Of course it goes without saying that, regardless of how hard one tries, it is simply impossible to make all students happy. Being open minded, constructive, and fair to all parties is the best thing one can do for oneself and one's students.

I have been a TA for almost two years and can say that the experience is both enriching and rewarding if the International TA wants to accept the challenge.

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APPENDIX

Consent Form

Communication Between American Students and Russian Teaching Assistants.

This interview is being conducted in connection with my pursuit of a Master of Arts in Professional Communication at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The purpose is to explore Russian teacher assistants' and American students' experiences in American classrooms. You will be asked to recall your previous experiences during the interview, which will last no more than two hours. All the information obtained during these interviews will remain confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can withdraw from this study any time with no penalty. Your name will not be used in any report or paper in that case.

Also each interview will be audio taped and transcribed. Audiotapes will be locked in a file when they are not being used for research purposes. There are no apparent risks to you by being involved in the research process to the participant. You do not have to discuss issues that you do not feel comfortable discussing. A pseudonym will be used for the narrative story of your interview.

By reading and signing this form you acknowledge that your participation in this form is strictly voluntary. If, at any time, you need to withdraw, you may do so without penalty simply by informing me.

Participant's Signature_____ Date_____

Print Participants Name:_____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

Thank you for your interest and participation in this research project. A copy of the research results will be available to you at your request. If you have any concerns, feel free to contact me at the Department of Communication.

Researcher: Popov, Aleksey
Office: Gruening, 507
Phone: 474-1876
Email: ftasp@uaf.edu

Advisor: Dr. Jin Brown
Office: Gruening, 507
Phone: 479-6799
Email: ffrba@uaf.edu

If you have any questions regarding Your participation in this study, please contact the Research Committee Coordinator, Office of Research Integrity, UAF at 474-7800 or fyirb@uaf.edu Please reference: IRB # 04-07